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## Chapter 18

### Divination

*Martti Nissinen*

#### 18.1 Divination, Magic, and Ritual: Conceptual Analysis

The relationship between divination and ritual is as complex as it is obvious, whether one understands divination and ritual as concepts or as practices. On the conceptual level, divination is not a direct equivalent of ritual, and the concepts are not interdependent in the way that would make the one a necessary part of the explanation of the other.

However, the way divination works is often difficult to explain without a reference to its ritual aspect. Divination may take place as a part of a larger ritual context, and divinatory practices may involve activities that are best described as ritual performances. Moreover, since divination is symbolic activity to a high degree, it is worth investigating whether the divinatory process as such can be perceived of as a ritual. The interface between divination and ritual can, thus, be studied from a twofold perspective: *divinatory rituals* and *divination as ritual*.

Both divination and ritual are discussed as family resemblance, or polythetic, categories, that is, consisting of an ample but unspecified amount of common characteristics present in the majority of members of each category but not necessarily in all of them (cf. Sørensen 2005: 49; Snoek 2006: 4–7; Uro 2016: 28). To explain the two

central terms very briefly, ‘divination’ in this chapter stands for acts of acquisition and transmission of allegedly superhuman knowledge by various means, while ‘ritual’ is understood as social action and symbolic communication, distinguished from ordinary action by some specific quality such as time, place, agency, agenda, purpose, or message.

The interface of ritual and divination is comparable to that between ritual and magic, since divination and magic share many features regarding the communication between the human and the superhuman, such as agency, symbolic interpretation, and ritualization. I shall return to these crucial features later in this chapter; at this point, however, it is necessary to make a conceptual difference between divination and magic. ‘Magic’ can be defined as symbolic ritual activity with the purpose of attaining a specific goal by means of divine-human communication and superhuman assistance, relying on specific skills, actions, and knowledge required from the human agent (Schmitt 2004: 92–3). For the most part, this definition could concern divination as well; however, a terminological distinction of magic and divination suggests itself because of differences in their practice and purpose.

Divination is motivated by the conviction that everything on earth is dependent on the divine will, the full knowledge of which, however, is beyond the cognitive capacity of human beings. Therefore, it is necessary to consult superhuman, full-access agents who possess the strategic information necessary for humans to be able to act in the best possible way (Pyysiäinen 2009: 31–2). Consulting superhuman sources of knowledge is often professional activity, the diviners constituting the link between humans and their divine informants. Divination is supposed to have an effect on human decisions and its

goal is often to bring about change. However, divination normally forms only an initial part of the decision-making process, detecting and defining its preconditions but not participating in its realization.

Magic, on the other hand, is itself a means of attaining a certain goal and actively bringing about the intended change, whether beneficial or harmful. The magician is an agent whose activity is supposed to have a direct effect to the patient—not *ex opere operato*, however, but typically as the result of the alleged divine-human collaboration (Schmitt 2004: 91). Magic is often ritual activity, involving symbolic performative acts symbolically representing the object, patient, and purpose of the activity. The symbolic elements may be verbal (blessing, curse, incantation, prayer, etc.) and/or material (liquids, foodstuff, figurines, etc.), and they form part of the ritual ensemble consisting of human, superhuman, and material components.

Magic and divination have much in common, especially the alleged collaboration of the human and superhuman agents and the crucial function executed by the human agent. Some forms of magic and divination may be practiced by any individual; however, their most-valued practitioners tend to be professionals acknowledged and ‘certified’ by their own community or at least a part of it. Both a diviner and a magician must be believed to possess special skills and the capacity to act in collaboration with divine agents. The superhuman agency is taken for granted both in magic and in divination, but since it is beyond everyday perception, it cannot be confirmed in the same way as ordinary things. Diviners and magicians may be distrusted, either because their

competence is found doubtful, the superhuman powers represented by them are not believed in, or because they are found to be hostile or strange (cf. Flower 2008: 132–52).

The difference between magic and divination is evident in terms of function, representation, and agency. The function of divination is to acquire and transmit superhuman knowledge. A diviner, whether a prophet, an augur, a haruspex, or an astrologer, receives and interprets messages and omens that are believed to be of divine origin, informing his or her audience about the meaning and interpretation of these messages and omens. Drawing consequences is the responsibility of the recipients who are supposed to act accordingly. The function of magic, again, is to bring about a change: healing, expelling a demon, causing damage, or warding off evil. This is probably why demons feature much more prominently in magic than in divination.

The diverse functions of magic and divination cause different performances. How divination works depends on the method. In Mesopotamia, for instance, the performance of a prophet typically happened orally in an altered state of consciousness in a public space such as a temple, while the haruspex (a diviner investigating the entrails of sacrificial animals) performed the divinatory ritual privately in an ordinary state of mind, informing the consultant on the divine judgement by way of a written report. Both ways, the result of the performance is a verbal summary of the acquired divine knowledge. Spoken and written verbal expressions are also used in magical acts, but their function and contents are performative rather than narrative; that is, they are not meant for transmission of information but for fulfillment of the purpose of the act. Even the role of the material element is different in a magical performance compared to a divinatory act:

The sheep liver or the constellation of stars functions as the platform of the omen to be interpreted, while the material used in magic may be directly related to the efficacy of the act (for instance, water); it may represent the patient of the act (for instance, hair), or symbolize divine protection (for instance, an amulet).

Differences in function and performance entail differences in agency. While the diviner receives and mediates superhuman knowledge, the magician puts such a knowledge into practice. The agency of the magician is often more proactive and goal-oriented than the agency of the diviner, because the emphasis of divinatory agency is on the preconditions of the action, while magical agency is directed to the effect.

In spite of the differences in function, performance, and agency, magic and divination are not completely separate practices, and the roles of the diviner and the magician may overlap. In the biblical imagination, a prophet such as Isaiah or Jeremiah may be found performing what is best described as a magical act (2 Kgs 20:7//Isa. 38:21; Jer. 51:59–64); a Mesopotamian diviner may use a prophet's hair and a fringe of a cloth to test the veracity of her or his prophecy (see Hamori 2012); and in the Greek magical papyri from Roman Egypt, divination appears as but one of a variety of magical practices (see Suárez de la Torre 2013). On the conceptual level, magic and divination are, therefore, polythetic categories sharing certain family resemblances. As practices, magic and divination should be understood as interrelated methods of divine-human communication.

Recognizing the conceptual kinship of magic and divination is important when we turn to the ritual aspect of prophecy and divination. In his cognitive theory of magic,

Jesper Sørensen launches a useful model of human action consisting of the conditional space, the action space, and the effect space, whereby diagnosis connects the conditional space with the action space, while prognosis links the action space to the effect space (Sørensen 2005; 2007: 141–53). Ritual action, also in magical contexts, tends to bypass the domain-specific expectations governing the relation between the condition, the action, and the effect, removing actions, agents, and objects from their ordinary perceptual domains and conveying symbolic interpretations for the diagnosis and the prognosis. Symbolic interpretations, which are attached to existing cultural, mythological, and theological models, largely replace ordinary perceptual clues as the explanation of the diagnosis and the prognosis, hence enabling a causal interpretation of the efficacy of the ritual.

Divination is not simply foretelling the future. Rather than downright prediction, divination is a method of *Zukunftsbewältigung*, or coping with the future, and, therefore, fundamentally about diagnosis and prognosis (Maul 2013). The sources from the ancient world make evident that communities and individuals, whether kings or private citizens, felt a strong need to acquire what was perceived of as divine knowledge to cope with their lives and to make the right decisions. In a divinatory act, the solicited or unsolicited transfer of divine knowledge serves as the diagnosis which connects the superhuman conditional space with the human action space. The prognosis linking the action with the effects, again, is the expectation of what consequences should be drawn from the acquired divine knowledge. Divination can be understood as a cognitive process linking human action with its (presumed) preconditions and its (presumed) effects. The effects

can be seen as the ultimate purpose of divinatory activity, even though they are not directly brought about by the divinatory acts.

## **18.2 Divinatory Rituals, Divination in Rituals: Extispicy and Prophecy**

The art of divination is manifold, but its many methods can be roughly divided into two basic types (Nissinen 2010; Stökl 2012: 7–11; Koch 2015: 15–18). Some divinatory methods are based on cognitive processes related to the systematization of omens recognized in observable objects or phenomena, such as stars (astrology), entrails of sacrificial animals (extispicy), or the flight of birds (augury). These methods are usually called technical, inductive, or artificial. The other type consists of divinatory methods that do not involve omens and observations, but communicate messages believed to be received intuitively, typically in an altered or ‘inspired’ state of consciousness. These methods, including prophecy and visionary activity, are referred to as intuitive, inspired, or natural divination.

The division between technical and intuitive divination is far from absolute. In Mesopotamian sources, the distribution of divinatory roles is clear-cut. The job descriptions of, for example, haruspices, astrologers, and prophets never overlap, and especially the methods of technical divination require specialization through education, which makes their use virtually impossible for an untrained person. In Greek and biblical sources, however, the technical/intuitive divide is less sharp, and people can be found using different methods of divination, which are usually not based on thorough education



(Flower 2008: 84–91; Hamori 2015: 26–31). The terminological separation should not be understood in an essentialist way, but, rather, as a heuristic tool that works as long as it helps to explain the phenomenon of divination. The division of divinatory methods into the technical and intuitive types makes sense, on the one hand, because it is recognized by the sources, whether biblical, Greek, or Mesopotamian; and, on the other hand, because the two types represent different cognitive modes. While technical divination, such as extispicy, utilizes a logico-scientific mode in explaining superhuman causality by way of systematized observation, intuitive divination, such as prophecy, is based on a narrative mode in transmitting divine knowledge to the audience without using any analytical tools (see Vedeler 2015, deriving the two cognitive modes from Bruner 1986).

Divination is affiliated with ritual action in various ways, which I will now exemplify with two methods representing the technical and the intuitive types of divination: extispicy and prophecy.

Reading the entrails of a sacrificial animal—more often than not the liver and the lungs of a sheep—was practiced not only by Babylonians and Assyrians but also by Hittites, Etruscans, and Greeks. The practice of extispicy first appears in Mesopotamia in the third millennium BCE, and its distribution around the Mediterranean is very probably due to interactions between the cultures (Furley and Gysembergh 2015: 77–95). In Mesopotamia, ‘the art of the seer’ (*bārûtu*) was the primary means of acquiring divine knowledge for the purposes of the royal decision-making (see Koch 2015: 67–134). The *haruspex* was a highly educated professional whose skills included not only the proper inspection of the entrails of the sacrificial animals but also profound knowledge of the

canonical omen literature and the ability to write a report of the divination. The extant sources suggest that extispicies were performed primarily (although not exclusively) for the king, and their topics concerned the safety of the land and the royal family, political and military matters, and the king's private affairs. The god of extispicy *par excellence* was the sungod Šamaš, but a number of other gods participated in the judgement and were invoked as well (Steinkeller 2015).

The act of extispicy was performed as a ritual, the purpose of which was to give a positive or negative answer to the question of the consultant, such as: 'Šamaš, great lord, give me a firm positive answer to what I am asking you! Should Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, strive and plan? Should he enter his son, Sin-nadin-apli, whose name is written in this papyrus and placed before your great divinity, into the Succession Palace?' (SAA 4 149:1–4; Starr 1990: 160; date: mid-670's BCE). The question alone suggests a ritual setting, indicating that the papyrus on which the question was written was placed before the statue of the god. The entire sequence of ritual actions performed during the extispicy is not described in the sources available to us, but a number of prayers have been preserved (Starr 1983), which give enough idea of the nature of the basic components of the Mesopotamian extispicy ritual (for the following reconstruction, see Koch 2015: 72–4; cf. Steinkeller 2005).

The ritual actions begin in the evening preceding the extispicy by summoning the gods present at the extispicy. The diviner (*bārû*) first cleanses his mouth and then recites a prayer, in which he implores the gods to be truthfully present in the extispicy. Incense is burned and ablutions are poured for the gods to wash themselves. The gods are convened

to pronounce judgement, the lamb is presented to them, and they conduct a nocturnal trial over the consultant. The ritual slaughter and the inspection of the entrails are performed at the daybreak by the diviner. Prayers (*ikribu*)—both the *ikribu* of the right side, concerning the well-being of the consultant, and the *ikribu* of the left side, concerning his/her non-well-being—follow the course of the inspection of the intestines, which is performed in a fixed order. The divine judgement is deduced from the inspection and the report is written on a cuneiform tablet.

Extispicy appears in the Greek world for the first time at the late sixth century BCE at the latest. Vase-paintings showing extispicy are known from that period, and literary references to it in major Greek authors such as Herodotus, Thucydides, Aeschylus, and Xenophon become common in the fifth and fourth century BCE. At that time, extispicy became the principal form of technical divination in Greece, and even though the liver-reading was never developed as sophisticated a system as it was in Mesopotamia or Etruria, it was nevertheless a *tekhnē* that could only be performed by specialized experts (for Greek extispicy, see Collins 2008; Flower 2008: 32–7, 52–8, 159–65; Furley and Gysembergh 2015).

Greek extispicy took place especially during military campaigns, and the divinatory act was always preceded by a sacrifice. Sacrifices involving the investigation of the entrails of the sacrificial animals were called *hiera*, while another type of sacrifice, *sphagia*, was intended to observe the flow of blood. Texts comparable to the Mesopotamian *ikribu*, or any kind of diviner's manuals, are not known from the Greek world, hence the procedures of Greek divinatory rituals are not known precisely. It

becomes clear from the writings of Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, and other authors that the *hiera* (the word denotes both the ritual and the signs) were regularly performed before setting out a military campaign. The rites may also have included burnt offerings, and the sacrificial meat may have been consumed.

What unites Mesopotamian and Greek practices of extispicy from the ritual point of view is that in both cases, sacrifice and prayer are intertwined with divination in a way makes the act extispicy as a whole appear as a bidirectional ritual act. The sacrifice and prayer were directed towards the supernatural in order to receive a sign as the divine response (Beerden 2013: 32–34). Extispicy without a ritual was not even possible, since it could not have been performed without sacrificing the animal whose intestines were the object in which the divinely inscribed signs were to be found. The precondition of a successful extispicy was the divine presence. The sacrificial destruction of the animal transformed it ‘from an external object in the world of things into something more intimate and immanent to human beings: a part of the divine world’ (Bell 2005: 7854; cf. Bataille 1973: 58–60), and even the diviner had to be inspired by the gods when ‘the diviner experienced the presence of the divine assembly itself, which had gathered around the victim to write their judgments in the organs of the animal’ (Lenzi 2008: 55; cf. Flower 2008: 91; Winitzer 2010).

While the act of extispicy cannot be separated from accompanying ritual elements, prophecy constitutes a more tangled case. Prophecy, according to the prevailing scholarly definition, is transmission of allegedly divine knowledge by non-technical means, typically in an altered state of consciousness (Weippert 2014: 231–2). Often

unprovoked, the prophetic performance does not in principle presuppose a ritual or otherwise predetermined context. Nevertheless, it could well take place within ritual contexts in ancient Eastern Mediterranean temples, and the prophetic performance could also be thoroughly ritualized, as was the case in the principal sites of the Apollonian oracle, Delphi, Didyma, and Claros.

At Didyma, for example, the oracular session seems to have been embedded in a ritual setting (cf. Parke 1985: 218–19; Fontenrose 1988: 78–85; Lampinen 2013: 84–7). According to the description of Iamblichus (*Myst.* 3.11), dependent on Porphyry, the female prophet of Apollo at Didyma prepared herself for the reception of the god by fasting and bathing in the sacred precinct. During the preparations and/or the oracular process itself, the female prophet held a staff, sat on an axle, and dipped her feet in the water of the sacred spring rising within the inner sanctum (*adyton*); the exact order of these elements in the oracular ritual is not clear. The contact with the water of the sacred spring, and especially inhaling its vapors, enabled the prophet, in Iamblichus' Neoplatonist terms, to 'partake of the god', that is, to become possessed by him and become his instrument (see Addey 2014). The oracular session was participated by the *prophētēs* who was not an inspired speaker but the temple official who was responsible for mediating the divine words in versified form to the consultants. The whole Didymaeon procedure from the preparations of the female prophet to writing down the oracles in the *chrēsmographion* can be perceived of as a divinatory ritual.

The oracular process at the sanctuaries of Apollo at Delphi (see Fontenrose 1978: 196–228; Bowden 2005: 17–38) and Claros (see Parke 1985: 220–1; Lampinen 2013:

80–4) were comparable but not identical to that at Didyma; in all three cases, the reception of the divine word was organized as the focal point of a ritual procedure. The picture is different in Mesopotamian sources, in which the connection between prophecy and ritual clearly exists but is more difficult to figure out on the basis of the sources available to us. On the basis of the substantial amount of evidence for the presence of prophets (*muhhûm/mahhû*) in the temples of Mari, Assyria, and Babylonia, one would expect the prophets to feature often in descriptions of rituals. Such texts, in fact, are very few, but they are enough to demonstrate that prophets indeed had a role to play in some Mesopotamian rituals.

Two texts from eighteenth century BCE Mari pertaining to one of the foremost rituals of this city-state, the ritual of Ištar, include sections in which prophets are mentioned (FM 3 2 and 3 3; see Durand and Guichard 1997: 72–5). One of the texts mentions a male prophet and the other a group of female prophets who perform during the ritual in interplay with musicians. Broken as both texts are, they do not yield a complete picture of the ritual procedure, but in both of them, the performance of the musicians is somehow dependent on the prophets' ability to reach an altered state of consciousness. The divine inspiration, therefore, could not be taken for granted. Neither was the successful performance of the ritual dependent on the prophetic element, which does not seem to have formed the focal point of the ritual.

Another ritual text, dating from the Neo-Babylonian period more than a millennium after the texts from Mari, also mentions a prophet together with musicians performing in the ritual of the Lady of Uruk (LKU 51; Beaulieu 2003: 375). The text says

nothing of the prophet's actual prophesying; instead, he goes around (the statue of the goddess?) carrying a water-basin while a copper kettledrum is played and sacrificial meals are offered. Here, too, the prophet appears as another cultic functionary in a ritual not primarily focused on divination but possibly containing a divinatory element within a larger ritual framework.

The different interfaces of ritual and divination seem to be partly, but not entirely, due to the method of divination. Extispicy, requiring the slaughter of a sacrificial animal, is by necessity intertwined with (other) ritual acts, and even prophecy, as practiced in the major Greek oracle sites, could be organized as a ritual procedure. In the Near Eastern sources, prophecy in general is closely associated with temples, but prophetic performances are not presented as rituals in their own right; if prophets perform in ritual contexts, their performance is subordinate to the main purpose of the ritual.

### **18.3 Divination as Ritual?**

While 'rarely does an analysis decide something is not a ritual' (Bell 2005: 7848), I would like to resist the temptation of prematurely defining divination *as* a ritual. The above survey of the ritual dimension in extispicy and prophecy has demonstrated the complexity of the interface of ritual between divination. A ritual act may be the unconditional prerequisite of a divinatory performance, as is the case of extispicy and apparently also of Greek oracles of Apollo. In these cases, the divinatory procedure in its entirety is well describable as a ritual. On the other hand, a divinatory act such as the

prophetic proclamation of a divine message may be performed outside of any ritual framework. This is the case in ancient Near Eastern sources, which seldom present the prophetic process of communication as a ritual in its own right, but sometimes make prophets appear in a ritual context.

In fact, the sources tend to be quite unspecific about any details accompanying the divinatory performance other than the divine message proper, which leaves us largely ignorant of how they actually took place. This indicates a further complication in exploring the interface between ancient ritual and divination if we want to discuss them as historical and not only as analytical categories (cf. Bell 2005: 7852): our view is badly restricted by the fragmentary set of sources we have at our disposal. A ritual described or prescribed in a written text is not a ritual as a performance (Wright 2012: 197).

Moreover, the lack of a ritual description does not necessarily indicate the lack of ritual performance in the reality the text is reflecting. The written artifact can be assumed to have a historical connection with the ritual it deals with, but it allows us only a limited access to the phenomenon. Whatever ritual agencies can be found in the texts, they always come to us as the result of the decisions made by scribal agents, the gatekeepers of our access to the past. This necessarily results in an incomplete and potentially distorted image of the ancient phenomena, which must be kept in mind when reconstructing ancient rituals or practices.

The relative uncertainty about historical realities reflected by the sources can only be helped by the discovery of new source materials. Therefore, a comparative conceptual analysis may appear to be helpful, not only in imagining what is not directly visible in the



sources, but also in identifying some domain-specific (rather than time- or place-specific) structures and modes of action attached to divinatory and ritual activities. One of the most useful and, indeed, necessary concepts in mapping the interface of ritual and divination is *agency*, which highlights the comparability of ritual and divinatory acts.

Jesper Sørensen analyzes magical agency from a threefold perspective ascribing the agency to agent, action, and object (Sørensen 2007: 65–74; cf. Lawson and McCauley 1990; McCauley and Lawson 2002; Uro 2016: 33–5, 65–6). When agent-based agency is emphasized, the agent performing the magical act is the wielder of ritual efficacy and the facilitator of the transfer of essence between the sacred and the profane space, either through a role-value counterpart connection or through an identity connector. In action-based agency, the efficacy of the ritual is dependent on the correct reproduction of a ritual sequence which creates a connection between the sacred and profane spaces. The procedural character of the action as well as the speech-acts belonging to it makes it independent from the performer. Object-based agency, on the other hand, ascribes the ritual efficacy to the object used in the ritual, often relying on perceptual resemblance to elements in the sacred space.

Thanks to the relatedness of the categories of magic and divination, the threefold scheme of agent-, action-, and object-based agencies can be applied also to divinatory acts which, as we have seen, are also perceived of as communication between the sacred and profane spaces. Different kinds of divinatory performances emphasize the three elements of agency differently, which becomes evident when we, again, compare extispicy and prophecy.

In extispicy, all three elements function prominently. The object is important: not just any part of the entrails of an animal functioned as the site of the divine signs but only the one in which the gods had chosen to be present. This, again, required a proper action: the animal must have been sacrificed following a correct procedure, which included the flawlessness of the animal and the purity and appropriateness of the performers of the ritual. Finally, the agent, that is, the diviner, had to be fully qualified to perform the inspection of the entrails, which was an impossible task for anyone without proper education. While all three aspects of agency, hence, are significant for the efficient performance of extispicy, it may be best described as relying primarily on the action-based agency—not because the agent and the object were less significant, but because the fixed ritual procedure was the permanent connector of the sacred and profane spaces, while the object was different every time, and also the agent could change.

In prophecy the three elements of agency are present but differently organized. Prophets may occasionally use objects in their performances, but no specific agency, let alone efficacy, is ascribed to such objects, neither do prophetic performances seem to follow prescribed ritual procedures unless they form part of another framework. What matters most in prophetic divination is agent-based agency, especially the role of the prophet as an identity connector. This is exactly what is at stake ‘in temporary examples of possession, in which an agent belonging to the sacred space simply takes over the agent of the profane space’ (Sørensen 2007: 67). In the prophetic process of communication, the actual agent is the divine sender of the prophetic message, whose inspired mouthpiece the human agent, the prophet, is believed to be.

Both prophecy and extispicy, therefore, share the basic elements of ritual agency with magic, indeed, with ritualized activity in general, and the same is probably true with most divinatory methods. Prophecy functions in a way somewhat similar to what Robert McCauley and Thomas Lawson call a special agent ritual (McCauley and Lawson 2002: 120–2; cf. Uro 2010: 232–3; 2016: 33–4, 85–7). The prophetic performance is not repeatable, it does not follow a set procedure, and the connection between the superhuman agent and the audience happens exclusively through the special agent, the prophet, who is believed to be capable of acting as the mouthpiece of the god. However, unlike the special agent ritual, prophecy is not necessarily performed for one single patient at a time. Extispicy, too, could perhaps be called a special agent ritual. It is performed frequently—not, however, according to a fixed timetable but, rather, on demand; it can only be performed by an agent with acknowledged qualifications, while the consultants may change; and it is usually performed for one patient only. However, extispicy also shares features with special instrument rituals, because the connection with the superhuman agent happens not only through the agent but also through the entrails of the sacrificed animal, in which the god is believed to be present.

Furthermore, ritual and divination have a similar social function: if ritualization is ‘a strategy for the construction of certain types of power relationships effective within particular social organizations’ (Bell 1992: 197), the same is certainly true for divination. Divinatory acts typically serve the construction and negotiation of power relationships and are, depending on the method, often ritualized.

Is it, then, because of all these points of convergence, justified to conclude that divination *is* ritual? An unequivocal answer to this question is not readily at hand. To state categorically that divination *is not* a ritual does not suggest itself, because divinatory acts are so often organized and performed in a way that reveals unmistakably ritual elements. But cannot the same be said of a random and unplanned prophetic performance happening outside of any ritual framework?

Evidently, divination and ritual should be discussed as distinct categories, even though they overlap to a considerable degree. Divination, like ritual, is social action and symbolic communication. ‘Ritual participants *do* something to something or somebody’ (Sørensen 2005: 52, emphasis original), and the same could be said of divination. However, we have to ask who is the patient in divination, and what kind of efficacy is a divinatory act supposed to have. The consultant of extispicy and the addressee of a prophetic speech can be said to be the patients of the divinatory act, but they are not patients in the same sense as, for instance, in healing or in a magical act. The purpose of divination is not primarily to bring about a change in the life or the status of the consultant or the addressee him/herself, but to have an influence on his/her action with regard to the matter consulted and on the basis of the knowledge acquired from the superhuman full-access agents. The efficacy of the divinatory act, therefore, is indirect and dependent on the patient’s own action and interpretation.

#### **18.4 Early Christianity**

Early Christianity forms part of the ancient Eastern Mediterranean world when it comes to ritual and divination. Prophecy was an accepted and appreciated institution in the first centuries CE (Aune 1983: 203–11). As far as can be judged from early Christian writings (for instance, 1 Corinthians 12 and Didache 11–13), two features of prophecy stand out: first, prophetic activity typically coincides with cultic celebrations, thus having a markedly ritual context; and second, prophets assume leadership roles in early Christian communities. The ritual context is a shared feature with ancient Eastern Mediterranean prophecy in general, while community leadership is untypical of prophecy in non-Christian contexts. While this places prophecy differently in the early Christian authority structure in comparison with the contemporary or earlier types of Eastern Mediterranean prophecy, the agency of the Christian prophets, especially their role as identity connectors was essentially the same. The prophets executed the function of inspired spokesmen of the divine authority both ritually and as community leaders. At the same time, prophecy appears as a relatively unstable, structurally diverse, and locally legitimized institution, which after the full institutionalization of the church became rare.

Divination other than prophecy was a matter of a much longer-lasting debate in early Christianity from Apostolic Fathers to Church Fathers. While Lactantius used Apollonian oracles as testimonies in his defense of the Christian doctrine (see Kaltio 2013), most Christian writers condemned divinatory practitioners, especially those of Christians themselves. The centuries-long debate against magical and divinatory practices demonstrates that they were widely practiced by Christians who, to judge from the prohibitions, turned to both written oracle texts and expert diviners when they needed insight into the future (see Luijendijk 2014: 79–91). Christians are not found practicing

types of divination requiring sophisticated expertise such as reading the liver. Instead, they seem to have relied on simpler methods such as sortilege (*sortes*), a kind of lot oracle involving a ritual in which an oracle is located in a written codex and interpreted for the consultant. Texts representing the *sortes* genre are known from manuscripts written in different languages, and some of them have an emphatically Christian character, such as the recently published Coptic fifth or sixth century *Gospel of the Lots of Mary* (Luijendijk 2014). Such a text, small enough to be carried in a pocket or a pouch, could be used by an itinerant *sortilegus/sortilega* who could perform the ritual anywhere where his/her services were needed.

The *sortes* provide an interesting example of early Christian divinatory agency that did not differ in any significant manner from that in its cultural environment. They respond to the same human needs as oracles and divination in general, and they represent a similar kind of an agent-based divinatory agency as the Eastern Mediterranean oracle institutions. Most importantly, the lots, through the divinatory and ritual specialist, functioned as a channel for an individual to become conversant with superhuman knowledge—something that was taken seriously even by the polemicists whose criticism is primarily targeted the practitioners rather than the practice itself. This highlights the social aspect of the divinatory agency, which is closely related to the issue of authority and legitimacy.

All divination happens within a socio-religious structure, and, therefore, the agent, action, and object of any divinatory act may be either be approved of or contested by members of the community within which the act takes place. The diviner's claim to

divine knowledge may bring divinatory agency into question, not because there is disagreement about the functionality and efficacy of the divinatory (ritual) act, but because of its challenge to existing authority structures. When early Christian writers make claims about prophecy and divination, it often amounts to ‘formulating identity, constructing epistemic boundaries, and shoring up their own authority’ (Nasrallah 2003: 26). Therefore, the way divination links human action with its (presumed) preconditions and its (presumed) effects is never a ‘neutral’ process but deeply entangled in the social and ideological positions of the agents and agencies involved in this process.

## **18.5 Conclusion**

Sources of Early Christian divination are not ample enough to form an adequate basis for mapping the interface of ritual and divination. Therefore, I have used examples from ancient Near Eastern and Greek divinatory practices, especially extispicy and prophecy, to demonstrate different facets of the ritual aspect in the acquisition and transmission of allegedly divine knowledge. Extispicy could not be properly performed without a ritual sacrifice of the animal, the intestines of which served as the instrument of acquiring divine knowledge. In the case of extispicy, the divinatory act can as such be regarded as a ritual. Prophetic divination, on the other hand, may or may not have been embedded in a ritual setting, even though it, unlike extispicy, usually took place in temples and was typically performed in an altered state of consciousness.

Divination and ritual are best compared from the point of view of agency. Whether or not divination is performed by way of a ritual act, it normally involves an agent, a patient, and an instrument. Divinatory agency is mostly agent-based rather than action- or object-based. Hence, divinatory acts can be compared to, and sometimes even characterized as, special agent rituals—not without qualification, however, since in some forms of divination even the object (such as the sheep liver or the *sortes*) and the action (proper performance of the oracular procedure) play an important role. While it cannot be said that any divinatory act *is* a ritual in a general or generic sense, it is virtually impossible to speak of divination without referring to its ritual aspect.

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